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Mediaeval Art: The Icon of St. George of Lagani

(From a photograph published in *Materiali po Arkheologii Kavkaza*, Vol. X)

[*See page 89*

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Mediaeval Art: Carved wooden door in the village of Chukhuli

(From a photograph published in *Materiali po Arkheologii Kavkaza*, Vol. X)

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Mediaeval Art. Icon of the Archangel Gabriel at Lagani

(From a photograph published in *Materiali po Arkheologii Kavkaza*, Vol. X)

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Mediaeval Art: Icon of the Christ of Lagani

(From a photograph published in *Materiali po Arkheologii Kavkaza*, Vol. X)

(from page 354

[Medieval Georgia]

THE LIFE OF GEORGIA

Kazakh district of Georgia. No very ancient examples of Caucasian rug-weaving exist, but it is certain that the industry was developed from remote times. But here again, as Georgian architecture is part of East Christian architecture so is the Caucasian weaver's art an integral part of Islamic art—although the Christian weavers of Armenia, using what has come to be an essentially Islamic medium, have acquired no little renown.

Georgian and Armenian illumination, which achieved a certain degree of quality, cannot compare with the gorgeous workmanship of the Persians, and its technique is an adaptation of the Persian manner—including the aged animal style—and East Christian ecclesiastical formalism. The little that remains of Georgian fresco-painting and mosaic-work is crude copying from the Greek masters, but Georgian carving on wood and stone, although in the Byzantine tradition, is good work and has some originality. It is certainly the equal of the Armenian stone-carving which has attained some celebration in Europe.

In two spheres of art did the mediæval Georgians achieve not only quality equal to the best of Byzantium and Persia, but creative originality. In epic poetry, the Georgians far surpassed the Byzantines; and although comparison is difficult and invidious, it may be claimed that the masterpieces of Shota Rusthaveli and Sargis Tmogveli rival, if they do not surpass, the more celebrated works of their Persian contemporaries. And in the metallurgical arts—particularly in their own speciality, the metal icon—the Georgians produced creations which certainly equalled the products of the Islamic and Mediterranean cities of the time.

The churches of Georgia in their general design and structure may be divided into two principal types, which correspond in character to contemporary monuments through the Byzantine world and Armenia. The more ancient was the *centralized* type—the circular or quadrangular chapel, so constructed as to direct the gaze of the devout upward to the arched dome of the cupola, which with its sacred frescoes was to be identified with the vault of heaven. By the sixth century the majority of churches were being built in this style—which Strzygowski derives from the domed tent of the nomad Sacæ and the fashion of which he attributes to the influence of Iranian and Armenian ideas. The old Roman *basilica*, with its broad nave and impression of deep perspective, was passing. Justinian built his church on the Grave of Our Lord in Jerusalem in the new style. It was

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the high passes of the Caucasian Alps represent the first attempt at turning sanctuaries into churches of Our Lord —the first architectural attempts at the reconstruction of *Mairemni* into buildings more suitable for Christian worship. From these crude experiments there grew and developed those Svanian *basilicas*, the best examples of which are the Churches of the Prophet John in Enashi and of the Archangel Michael in Pkhotreri.

The Svanian *basilicas* are not, strictly speaking, very ingenious either in their form or in their detail; even the altar-sections—which together with the south walls are, in Georgian churches, usually most distinguished by luxurious decorations—are unattractive and unassuming. There are exceptions, however, as in the case of the Church of the Virgin at Zhibiani; the Church of Christ near Chubiani; the Church of the Transfiguration at Nemskhvira; the Church of the Archangel Michael at Matskhvarishi and the Church at Pkhotreri.

Ornamentation in Svanian churches generally consists of flat pilasters separated from each other by small and narrow arches as in the Church of the Virgin at Zhibiani. These pilasters have not developed capitals and their decoration is confined to shallow gashes with crude ornamentation carved in zig-zag shape.

Finer and more architecturally artistic are the columned arches which are found on the western and eastern walls of the Church of St. Barbara at Khé, of the Archangels at Matskhvarishi; on the western side of the Enashi Church and of the church at Tenali in Dadianis-Svaneti. This method is, no doubt, copied from Kutais Cathedral and was fashionable in the Byzantine west and in Russian churches of the Vladimir-Suzdal type.

The peculiar genius of the Georgians in the metallurgical arts and in enamel work has already received some recognition in Western Europe. The writings of Kondakov have made known to Western students the treasures of the monasteries and churches of Georgia and Svaneti, and examples of the work of the mediæval Georgian smiths and enamellers have found their way into European and American Museums.[1] The best known examples of the Georgian metal-smith's work are the three principal icons preserved at Gelati; a twelfth-

[1] The gold and enamel reliquary of Queen Katévani described by O. M. Dalton in *Recueil d'études dédiées à la mémoire de P. Kondakov*; the Georgian gold and enamel objects in the Svenigorodskoi Collection in the Metropolitan Museum of New York, including plaques from the twelfth-century icon of Jumati.

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Mediaeval Art: Icon of the Mother of God of Chukhuli

(From a photograph published in *Materiali po Arkheologii Kavkaza*, Vol. X)

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[Medieval Georgia]

century Christ, and a Virgin attributed by Kondakov to the tenth century, at the monastery of Khopi in Mingrelia, and another Virgin dating from the eleventh or twelfth century; a Christ of the twelfth century decorated with contemporary enamels from the Mingrelian monastery at Kezkheri; and the tenth-century Hodigitria at Martvili. The most celebrated of the Gelati icons is the Virgin of Kakhuli, so called since it belonged originally to the monastery of Kakhuli in the Chorokhi country whence it was removed during the Turkish wars of the sixteenth century. The Kakhuli icon is a large gold triptych into which are set no less than ninety-four enamels, of which seventy are of Byzantine and the others of Georgian provenance. The icon itself is attributed to the second quarter of the twelfth century, but many of the enamels are of older date; namely the plaque of Christ crowning the Emperor Michael VII and his wife Maria of Alania,[1] and the two crosses bearing inscriptions in honour of King Kwiriké of Abkhazeti. Diehl compares the Khakhuli icon as a technical masterpiece to the Pala d'Oro of St. Mark's; and Kondakov states that

> "the enamels are notable for precision of design and for the brightness of their colours, in which sky-blue and turquoise blue, tones of violet and purple, and delicate shades of flesh are notable; you see there a self-confidence, a mastery and delicacy in the execution of detail which are only possible when art, having emerged from the period of experiment and uncertainty, has already evolved a set of forms and a perfectly developed ornamentation".[2]

Less known than the Mingrelian icons are those found in Svaneti, many of which have been published by Countess Uvarov.[3] In the Svanian churches are some of the finest survivals of Georgian and Byzantine metallurgical iconography from the eleventh to the fifteenth centuries, such as the Christ of Zhibiani, the Archangel Gabriel of Lagani and the Archangels Gabriel and Michael of Chukhuli, for the earlier period, and the magnificent Christ of Lagani and the Mother of God of Chukhuli for the fifteenth century.

Icons derive from the portraits of mummies of Hellenistic Egypt executed in *tempera* on wooden panels, first coated with *gesso*, which were laid on the coffins. From the fourth century they began to have a great vogue in the Byzantine

[1] Maria of Alania—or of Abasgia (Abkhazeti). For the discussion of the identity of the Byzantine Empress Maria of Alania see Brosset, who suggests that she was probably no other than Martha, daughter of Bagrat IV (*H. de la G.*, p. 330, note 2).

[2] Kondakov, *Essays*, p. 126.

[3] Uvarov, *Mat. Kav.*, Vol. X.

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world, and the adoration which the icons aroused among the masses of the population led to the great "iconoclastic" struggle within the Empire. With the triumph of the Iconophils in the ninth century, there was a great revival in the fashion, and icons of every class were produced, from the painted wooden panels of the poor to the exquisite achievements of the jeweller's art which decorated the palaces of the great.

The icon was essentially an artistic medium of the Byzantine mind and the Georgians undoubtedly adopted from the Byzantines the cult and the art of the icon. Georgian painted icons are never of first quality, although they early achieved a certain humanism which is lacking in Byzantine and contemporary painting, and which is exemplified both in some of the Gelati icons and in the frescoes at Nekresi in Kakheti. Georgian goldsmiths work is, however, the equal of any that came from the workshops of Byzantium—where indeed many Georgians were employed—and Georgian enamel work is little, if at all, inferior to Byzantine work. The metallurgical arts—which had such a high development in the Middle Ages—seem to have attracted the genius of the Georgians, and they attained a degree of technical perfection which compares with that of Byzantium and Italy, and elevates them far above the contemporary workers in metallurgy in Eastern Europe, Russia and Armenia. The chief difference between Georgian and Byzantine metallurgical iconography is to be found in the non-representational character of the Georgian work. Byzantine icons generally have a plain background, although they may have an embossed frame-like border; the background of Georgian icons is entirely filled by complicated designs, similar in character to the elaborate sculptured designs of Georgian churches. These backgrounds constitute the very special beauty of Georgian icons, and the combination of this non-representational and geometric art with the essential elements of East Christian artistic technique represents a Georgian synthesis of Western and Eastern conceptions.

Georgian enamels are rather coarse in drawing and less accurate in finish than the Byzantine examples. The *cloisons* are more distinct and less neat, and the colour-schemes are less delicate in tone, although the Georgian enamellers achieved the eight colours of the Byzantines. The Georgians excelled particularly in the manufacture of elaborate geometrical plaques, and here they surpassed the Byzantine workers, the

[Mediæval Georgia]

development of whose process was always limited by their tendency to adhere to representational designs.

By the fourteenth century the Georgian icon had already begun to deteriorate, and by the end of the sixteenth century it has lost all artistic value. The influence of Capuchin monks had introduced a certain element of the Italianate, and the icons of this period, as for instance the Virgin of Kavtis-Khevi, were becoming thoroughly bastardized.

The church plate of the time of the mediæval Georgian Kingdom illustrates further both the skill of Georgian craftsmen and the wealth of the Georgian nobles. Byzantine influence was strong, and the finest example of all which survives, the enamelled gold cross in the Svanian church of Matskhvarishi, is attributed by Countess Uvarov to Byzantine workmanship of the twelfth century. Georgian workmanship in reliquaries, cups, plate and crosses was, however, exceedingly fine, and in many pieces, as in the large gold and enamel *kazarpeshni* or drinking spoons (a purely Georgian fashion), the Georgian craftsmen evolved their own interpretation of both Byzantine and Persian decorative motives.

The few of the Georgian bronze church-gates which survive show exquisite workmanship, and like the stone-sculptures and the carved wooden gates which are preserved at Mghvimé Monastery, in the Svanian churches, and in the Tiflis Museum, they are essentially of local inspiration, a Georgian combination of the national decorative designs—such as the interlaced—with Persian and Byzantine elements introduced.

Byzantium, before all, was a civilization; secondly, a political Empire. And until the fifteenth century the civilization of the Near Eastern lands was in essentials Byzantine. East Christian art was the expression of the Byzantine mind—a stone the facets of which reflected different lights according to whether the eyes cast upon it were Bulgarian or Armenian, Rumanian or Georgian, Serbian or Russian.

The Byzantines were the creators of painting as a living art, and their pupils were Italy in great degree, the Russian Masters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the provincial schools of Greece and Serbia, Bulgaria and Rumania (which though limited in many ways were not without merit), and the Armenians and Georgians. The Balkan schools, in the last decade, have come in for their meed of appreciation from European students, and the material for Greek and Balkan iconography is plentiful. But the Armenian and

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000 Georgian artists have been ignored; and indeed, wars, anarchy and time have destroyed the most of the material by which their work could have been compared with that of the western schools of East Christian art.

Georgia has preserved few examples of pure Byzantine colour work. The most celebrated is the twelfth-century mosaic of the Church of the Virgin at Gelati; the mosaic was a gift from Alexios Comnenos to David Aghmashenebeli. The Church of Gordi in Mingrelia possesses a Virgin, attributed to the tenth century—and if the attribution is correct it is the oldest known Byzantine painted icon. It was brought to Georgia, according to tradition, by Elena, wife of Bagrat IV—he who completed the building of Kutais Cathedral. In Svaneti, Countess Uvarov noted in different churches eleven Byzantine painted icons, two of which she attributed to the twelfth century. There are also in the shrines of Gelati, Khopi, Mtzkheta, Tsalendjikhi, Alaverdi and Largwisi, a number of attractive painted icons, but these belong to the relatively late period of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.[1]

●532 778 In the manufacture of icons it has been remarked that the Georgian genius and taste developed in the direction of the smith's craft. There are, however, two early painted icons described by Mourier, the character of which indicates that the Georgians had attained merit in this class of painting; one at Gelati showing King Bagrat IV in an attitude of prayer before the Virgin and Child; another at Shemokhmedi of the Virgin and Child. Both these icons are in clear bright colours and the physiognomy of the subjects is typically Georgian.

532 The churches of Georgia were covered with frescoes and of these some remain, although they are without exception in a badly neglected condition. The native work is, on the whole, of inferior quality. The laws of perspective were not studied, and the colours were applied flat without any shading. A slavish adherence to Greek formulas without the knowledge to interpret them produced an inferior style, which resulted in monotony of design, absence of relief, crudity of execution and lack of *nuances*. Much attention was, however, devoted to accuracy of detail in costume, which gives the work

[1] The author had in his possession a Virgin and Child of this class—with a Russian superscription imposed. The type is very distinct from the formalized Greek and Russian styles, and represents in fact the portrait of a Georgian girl and child. The humanistic treatment is remarkable. The icon now belongs to the Church of the Georgian community in Paris.

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532 an historical, if not an artistic, value. Again the frescoes preserve the only authentic memories of the likenesses of historic figures. The eleventh-century church of Sioni at Ateni in Mingrelia has the family of Ashot the Kuropalatês, although in this case the frescoes appear to have been painted two hundred years after the subjects were living. The more famous frescoes at Gelati show the likenesses of Bagrat III, Giorgi I, Bagrat IV and his wife Elena and David Aghmashenebeli and Rusudani. The church of Betani in Kartli, which collapsed half a century ago, contained the portraits of Tamara and her father and her son. The churches of Nikortzminda, Ertatzminda, Safar and Mghvimé contain the remnants of frescoes some of which appear to be by Greek hands; and at Mtzkheta and in the Mingrelian churches there are many portraits of rulers who were living between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. An interesting characteristic of the later frescoes is the indications which are patent of the influence of Italian Renaissance and Persian art —both indifferently apprehended.

532 212 177 It was in calligraphy and in the illumination of manuscripts—work giving scope to individual delicacy and skill —that the Georgians excelled. The beautiful Georgian alphabet lent itself to the genius of the calligrapher—work in which the leisurely and child-like mind of the eastern artist delights. From the ninth and tenth centuries the Georgian monks on Mount Athos were engaged with the enthusiasm of the discoverers of a new knowledge in translating the Scriptures and Greek theological and theosophical works into Georgian. Others, returning to Georgia, pursued their work in the Georgian monasteries. The most ancient of the Georgian manuscripts are the Evangel from Adishi in Svaneti —attributed to the end of the ninth century—and the manuscript completed in 940 at the Shatberdi monastery on the Chorokhi and now in the Convent of Djruchi near Sacheri in Mingrelia. The Cathedral of Mtzkheta has a tenth-century manuscript of Gregory the Theologian, and for the eleventh century there are various manuscript Evangels, the principal of which are those at Alaverdi—by the hands of the most famous of Georgian calligraphers, the brothers Dvali—and at Gelati. The churches of Svaneti contain a number of Evangels written during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the Gelati Evangel Oriental influences are evident, and various motives from Persian art are introduced. The perspective is bad. There are no less than two hundred and

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forty miniatures. The colours used are blue, red, carmine, green and violet. A fine miniature from Svaneti of the same period illustrated by Uvarov, shows a much more highly developed artistic taste and is in the best Byzantine tradition.

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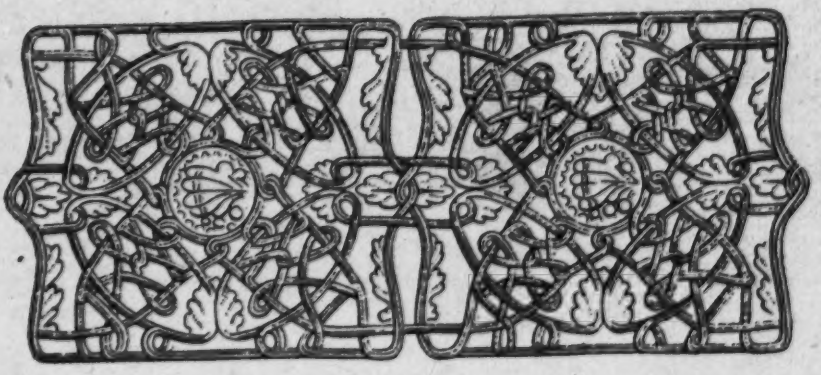

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St. Grigol Khandzteli, from the tenth century MS of Merchuli, designed by Charles Beazley, after the coloured reproduction of the original published by N. Marr in *Teksti i Razisknaniya*, Book VII

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